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Vaccine will help reduce cervical cancer rates

By Cynthia Taggart
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At nine years old, girls expect their parents to protect them from the world's dangers. They use seatbelts because Mom says the restraints will protect them in an accident. They listen when Dad tells them not to talk to strangers. They grit their teeth but cooperate when parents schedule their tetanus shots.

Parents take such protective measures to spare their children accident injuries, victimization and disease. The HPV vaccine is another protective measure. It can prevent most cases of cervical cancer, a life-threatening disease no parents want their daughters to experience.

"Protect them now," said Donna Holden, a registered nurse with the Panhandle Health District, which offers the HPV vaccine. "If a woman is a virgin when she marries, but her spouse had other partners, she's at risk if she hasn't had the vaccine."

HPV is human papillomavirus, the most common sexually transmitted virus in the United States. About 20 million people in this nation are infected with it, and about 6.2 million more get infected each year. About 74 percent of those infections are in people ages 15 to 24.

Most HPV infections don't cause symptoms. But some strains of the virus lead to cervical cancer, one of the most common cancers in women worldwide. Pap tests have significantly reduced the number of lives lost to cervical cancer. The tests identify abnormalities that indicate pre-cancer, and treatment follows.

PHD has had a CA.RE grant from the North Idaho Cancer Center since 2004 to help women follow up on abnormal Pap tests. The grant has helped nearly 300 women.

"We've issued 83 vouchers this year for women whose abnormal Pap smears indicated the need to take a microscopic look at the cervix," said Gail Turley, a senior registered nurse at Panhandle Health District (PHD). "For many, that meant the removal of abnormal cells."

This year, an estimated 11,100 new cases of cervical cancer will be diagnosed in the United States and about 3,700 women will die from it, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The median age of those diagnosed women will be 47. HPV will play a role in every case.

Nearly 90 percent of HPV infections cause no evident problems and clear within two years. HPV infections are not treated. Treatment is directed at the lesions they cause, but the risk of disease doesn't disappear with the lesion. Preventing HPV infection in the first place is the best insurance against cervical cancer.

Abstaining from any sexual activity is guaranteed prevention. A long-term monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner is likely the most reliable preventive behavior. Studies on the effectiveness of condoms to reduce the risk are ongoing.

The only tested protection against HPV is a new vaccine approved in June 2006. The vaccine protects against four major HPV types that cause about 70 percent of all cervical cancer and 90 percent of genital warts.

If girls take the vaccine before they're sexually active, they haven't yet been exposed to the virus. According to the CDC, the HPV vaccine can prevent in these girls nearly 100 percent of the disease caused by the four major types of HPV.

"Protect them now," said Holden. "People can have no symptoms, no clue they were infected with HPV until they're diagnosed with cervical cancer."

Belgium, Austria, Germany, Italy, France, Norway and Luxemburg all recommend that girls ages 10 to 13 be vaccinated for HPV. The vaccine is approved in 70 countries.

In the United States, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices—15 experts appointed by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services--recommends the HPV vaccine for girls ages 11 and 12, although it also says girls as young as 9 can start the vaccine series. It also recommends the vaccine for girls and women ages 13 to 26, ideally before they start sexual activity.

Sexually active women who haven't been infected with HPV receive the vaccine's full benefit. Already-infected women receive less benefit. The vaccine is not recommended for pregnant women.

The $150 vaccine is administered in three doses over six months. The federal Vaccines for Children program, available at PHD, offers the vaccine to eligible children at no cost.

About $3.8 *billion* is spent in the country each year on cervical cancer screening, follow-ups to abnormal Pap tests and treatment for pre-invasive and invasive cervical cancer. Models developed to evaluate the vaccine's impact suggest that vaccinating all 12-year-old girls in one group could reduce the lifetime risk for cervical cancer in that group by 20 percent to 66 percent with an accompanying decrease in Pap test abnormalities.

"We can prevent cervical cancer in women," Holden said. "We have the vaccine and it's available for all incomes."